

Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Essential Fish Habitat Identification and Conservation in Alaska

Amendment 78 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Groundfish Fishery of the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Area
Amendment 73 to the Fishery Management Plan for Groundfish of the Gulf of Alaska
Amendment 16 to the Fishery Management Plan for Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands King and Tanner Crabs
Amendment 8 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Scallop Fishery off Alaska
Amendment 7 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Salmon Fisheries in the Exclusive Economic Zone off the Coast of Alaska

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Abstract: The 1996 amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act included new provisions concerning the identification and conservation of Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) amended its five fishery management plans (FMPs) in 1998 to address the new EFH requirements. The Secretary of Commerce, acting through the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), approved the Council's EFH FMP amendments in January 1999. In the spring of 1999, a coalition of seven environmental groups and two fishermen's associations filed suit in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia to challenge the Council's EFH FMP amendments. In September 2000, the court upheld NMFS' approval of the EFH amendments under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, but ruled that the environmental assessment (EA) prepared for the amendments violated the National Environmental Policy Act. The court ordered NMFS to complete new and thorough environmental analyses. Accordingly, this environmental impact statement evaluates alternatives and environmental consequences for three actions: (1) describing and identifying EFH for fisheries managed by the Council; (2) adopting an approach for the Council to identify Habitat Areas of Particular Concern within EFH; and (3) minimizing to the extent practicable the adverse effects of Council-managed fishing on EFH. Most of the controversy surrounding the level of protection needed for EFH concerns the effects of fishing activities on sea floor habitats. Substantial differences of opinion exist as to the extent and significance of habitat alteration caused by bottom trawling and other fishing activities. This EIS reexamines the effects of fishing on EFH, presents a wider range of alternatives, and provides a more thorough analysis of potential impacts than the EA approved in 1999. The analysis indicates that there are long-term effects of fishing on benthic habitat features off Alaska, and acknowledges that considerable scientific uncertainty remains regarding the consequences of such habitat changes for the sustained productivity of managed species. Nevertheless, the analysis concludes that the effects on EFH are minimal because there is no indication that continued fishing activities at the current rate and intensity would alter the capacity of EFH to support healthy populations of managed species over the long term. No Council-managed fishing activities have more than minimal and temporary adverse effects on EFH, which is the regulatory standard requiring action to minimize adverse effects under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, but a variety of practicable management actions could be taken to provide additional habitat protection.